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SUBJECT: GON FLEXES MUSCLE IN ARREST OF JOURNALIST

Classified By: Political Counselor Russell J. Hanks for Reasons 1.4 (b) and d)

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. While Nigeria has a large and vocal media establishment, recent incidents may show the government is trying to flex its muscles going in to the 2007 elections. On Wednesday, June 14, Africa Independent Television (AIT) presenter Mike Aruleba was arrested by agents of the State Security Service (SSS) while preparing to do his morning broadcast. No exact charges have been brought, but he stands accused of threatening national security. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) The "Daily Trust" newspaper reported Aruleba's arrest on June 16. They quoted Kayode Are, Director General of the SSS, as saying "that there is need for the media to respect the protection of national interests when carrying out their duties." He continued, "...our law does not allow you to use falsehood to incite people, there is no way we can allow that to happen." He added that the media should not cover the story, but he did not indicate how Aruleba might have violated the national interest. Aruleba was released on bail in the evening of June 15, but was required to report for further questioning on June 19.

¶3. (C) AIT station manager Mr. Mac Amarere provided Poloff additional details of the arrest. He said SSS agents told him the arrest was due to a broadcast the previous day where Aruleba had said a presidential jet was recently purchased second hand from a German company. That would be significant because President Obasanjo had recently requested funds for a completely new jet. Accounting for the price difference between a new and used airplane would be difficult.

¶4. (U) Incidents concerning journalists still seem to be more the exception than the rule. However, they seem to have picked up during and after the debate about the third term issue. For example, SSS agents seized tapes criticizing President Obasanjo's third term plans from AIT in May. Freedom Radio in Kano had their broadcasts restricted in April for "unprofessional conduct." On March 22, Malam Mahmud Jega was fired as editor of the government owned New Nigerian Newspaper. There was no explanation for these incidents by the GON.

¶5. (C) COMMENT. SSS has not stated publicly how Aruleba violated the national interest with his reporting. It is at least possible that the explanation offered by Mr. Amarere is correct and that the presidency is trying to cover up an incident of corruption. However, stories of corruption frequently appear in the local press. It is also possible that SSS is trying to create a controlled environment for the transition of power in 2007. This would be consistent with Are's press statement saying that the media must not overheat the polity in the transition period. END COMMENT.

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